

**E**ach year on the last weekend in April, Prescott, Arizona, plays host to the Whiskey Off-Road—a 50-mile race that begins in the town square and takes competitors into the forest on a wild ride over the surrounding mountains, down into the desert town of Skull Valley and back. Todd Sadow, head honcho at Epic Rides, produces the race, and in February, while I was resting between laps at Epic Rides' 24 hours in the Old Pueblo, he insisted that I return to Arizona to ride the Whiskey. "Sure thing," I remember saying. Midway through a 24-hour race, a 50-miler seemed like a piece of cake.

When the West was wild, Prescott was the capitol of Arizona, and saloons stuffed with miners and ranchers ringed town square. Today, a youthful vibe prevails throughout the city, and its effects are readily apparent downtown. Watering holes still pepper "Whiskey Row," but art galleries, coffeehouses and chic restaurants have replaced most of the saloons. Country musicians dressed like mule skinnners play bluegrass music to hippie girls swinging Hula-Hoops in the grassy commons, and bicycle helmets threaten to outnumber cowboy hats. It's easy to like Prescott.

I left sunny California with visions of turquoise-blue skies and blue jays squawking from aromatic pine trees, but when I arrived in Prescott before the race, it was snowing hard, with 3 inches already on the ground. Prescott sits at 5000 feet, and the Whiskey Off-Road tops 7000 on its way over the mountains. I braced myself for a six-hour mud-and-pain fest—definitely not the romp in the woods I had signed up for.

Those who know Todd Sadow will attest to his uncanny luck with the forces of nature—and that few mortals possess his positive winning attitude. People will move Heaven and Earth for the guy, which is why The Whiskey Off-Road receives the support of the whole town. I pedaled down to the square at 6:30 race day morning under perfect skies, where I met Mayor Marlin Kuykendall joking with Sadow near the start line. Prescott's mayor wants the city on IMBA's list of showcase mountain bike destinations and has full-time trail specialist Chris Hosking on staff.



Prescott's 80-mile loop trail, which will eventually circumnavigate the city, is nearly complete, and now crews are working on a network of uber-technical, all-mountain trails in the Granite Dells—a lunar landscape to the north of the city. "Volunteers are numerous in Prescott," says Chris. "We are loaded with retired people who are still quite active, and they have lots of time on their hands. My best crew is called the 'Over the Hill Gang.' I think the youngest man is 60. These guys move rocks the size of cows."

The 50-Proof was delayed by a gunfight staged by outlaws in full Western regalia. After the black powder smoke and "bodies" were cleared, we zoomed out of town with a full police escort. I fell behind taking photographs, but even if I was on form, I could not have hoped to stay on pace with the leaders. To win the Whiskey, I'd need to average 15 miles an hour or better. As a first-timer on the course, my plan was to ride conservatively and finish without undue suffering. I kept my Pivot 429 in the middle chainring until the cha-cha line formed on the first stretch of singletrack.

Snow covered the shady slopes, and traction was perfect. Traffic moderated the seven-mile singletrack climb over the first mountain ridge, so the riders were quite conversational. I spoke with folks from Colorado, Oregon, Texas and California as I wove my way through the back of the peloton—and I met almost every one once again as I paused to fix a well-earned pinch flat on the 260 trail—a long, ripping, rock-strewn descent loaded with small jumps. My brakes were hissing steam when I forded the stream at the bottom.

Volunteer aid stations, stocked with food and water, are strategically located around the course, but none are as busy

as the one at mile 14—where the route tops out and meets the dirt road to Skull Valley. I was warned that this was the point of no return for 50-Proof racers—an 11-mile downhill to the desert floor followed by a 4000-foot climb back up the same road. I loaded up with food and water, hit the big ring and passed Tinker Juarez pacing behind eventual winner Andy Schultz. The leaders had already made the 22-mile run to Skull Valley and were only a few corners from the aid station. Whoa!

Skull Valley is a railroad crossing, one restaurant and a general store. A quick hello to a nice woman with a clipboard and a radio and I was released to return to Prescott. I took a picture of the Skull Valley General Store to prove I had indeed made the mistake of descending 11 miles into the desert and turned to face my next task. Mile 26, only 24 more to go. The mountains loomed like a blue wall above the valley, and in three hours, I hoped to reach snowcapped Sierra Prieto peak, the route's highest point.

Eighteen miles of climbing took its toll on competitors, many of whom were unraveling leg cramps on the roadside or pushing bikes up sections they would have easily climbed in the big ring in the wee hours of the morning. I stopped to talk with some friends at the summit and then set out for Thumb Butte and the most enjoyable descent that I can remember roosting in recent times. I was almost disappointed to reach pavement, but happy to have enough left in my legs to tuck in and finish the last miles into Prescott in the big ring. Police directed traffic at every intersection, and road cones made bike lanes on narrow roads. It was a warm welcome all the way back to town square where live music and a crowd of happy finishers cheered me across the line.

Later, at the awards ceremony, I learned that Andy Schultz set a new record, finishing the Whiskey in 3 hours, 17 minutes and 49 seconds—about half the time I took to make the trip. I'm shooting for five hours and change next year. Mark your calendars—it's the last Saturday in April 2011. I'll be there. □

